



## **Questions & Answers on the NOAA Fisheries Service Decision to Conduct an Endangered Species Act Status Review for West Coast Eulachon (Smelt)**

(March 2008)

### **Q. What are “eulachon?”**

- A. Eulachon (commonly called smelt, candlefish or hooligan) are endemic to the eastern Pacific Ocean, ranging from northern California to southwest Alaska and into the southeastern Bering Sea. Eulachon typically spend three-five years in saltwater before returning to freshwater to spawn from late winter through mid spring. In the portion of the species’ range that lies south of the U.S. – Canada border, most eulachon production originates in the Columbia River Basin. Other river basins in the U.S. where eulachon have been documented include the Sacramento River, Russian River, Humboldt Bay and several nearby smaller coastal rivers (e.g., Mad River), and the Klamath River in California; the Rogue River and Umpqua Rivers in Oregon; and infrequently in coastal rivers and tributaries to Puget Sound in Washington.

### **Q. Why is NOAA Fisheries reviewing the status of West Coast eulachon under the U.S. Endangered Species Act?**

- A. Any person can petition the Secretary (of Interior or Commerce) to list or delist a species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Within 90 days after receiving a petition, to the maximum extent practicable, the Secretary must make a finding as to whether the petition presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted. If a petition is found to present such information, the Secretary must promptly start a review of the status of the species concerned.

We received a petition from the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in November 2007 to list eulachon populations in Washington, Oregon and California under the ESA. After reviewing the information presented in the petition and other information readily available in agency files, we find that the petition presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted. We’re initiating a status review of smelt to determine if the species or distinct population segment(s) warrant ESA listing.

### **Q. Didn’t NOAA Fisheries already review Columbia River eulachon?**

- A. No. In 1999, Sam Wright petitioned us to list Columbia River eulachon. We did not accept that petition (64FR66601) and therefore no status review was conducted. The ESA defines the term species to include a subspecies or a distinct population segment (DPS) of any vertebrate species that interbreeds when mature. After reviewing Mr. Wright’s petition, we concluded that it failed to provide sufficient information indicating that eulachon populations in the Columbia River may warrant delineation as a DPS for consideration under the ESA.

**Q. What did NOAA Fisheries conclude about the information presented in the recently submitted petition?**

- A.** The petition seeks to list eulachon populations south of the U.S. – Canada border under the ESA. The petitioner feels these populations warrant delineation as a DPS because the U.S. and Canada differ in their regulatory control of commercial, recreational and tribal eulachon harvest, and differ in their management of smelt habitat. Although the petitioner felt that the available information is inconclusive, it noted that eulachon may be composed of several smaller DPSs. These could be identified based on differences in run timing, morphological traits, and genetic characteristics. After reviewing the information presented, we concluded that the petitioner presents substantial scientific information indicating that smelt may warrant delineation into one or more DPSs.

The petitioner also presents status information underscoring that eulachon populations from California to southeastern Alaska have declined in the past 20 years, especially since the mid 1990s. In particular, the petitioner expressed concern about declines in the Columbia River smelt populations that historically have accounted for the largest returns throughout the species' range. The petitioner also expresses concern that habitat loss and degradation (altered flows and increased siltation in spawning rivers, pollution), overharvest, and global climate change pose significant threats to the persistence of eulachon populations. After reviewing the information presented in the petition, as well as other information readily available to us, we conclude that the Cowlitz Indian Tribe's petition presents substantial scientific information indicating eulachon may be in danger of extinction, or likely to become so within the foreseeable future, throughout all or a significant portion of the species' range.

**Q. Does this decision mean that NOAA Fisheries is likely to list eulachon?**

- A.** Not necessarily. It means only that the agency has determined that the petition presents enough substantial scientific and commercial information to indicate that the petitioned action may be warranted.

**Q. What happens now that NOAA Fisheries Service has accepted the petition to list smelt under the ESA?**

- A.** NOAA Fisheries is soliciting information on the viability of, and threats to, West Coast eulachon. We're also interested in information about efforts being made to protect the species, and the names of potential peer reviewers.

**Q. What will NOAA Fisheries Service do next in this ESA petition process?**

- A.** The agency is beginning to compile and review the available status information on West Coast eulachon populations. Within 12 months of receiving the petition, by Nov. 8, 2008, NOAA Fisheries will make a determination on whether the petitioned action is warranted. If smelt populations are proposed for listing, it would not become final until November 2009.